Visual Culture in Neolithic South East Italy

Robin Skeates

Abstract
This paper examines transformations in the form and significance of visual material in Neolithic Apulia. It is argued that 'portable art' was increasingly valued as ritual paraphernalia, gifts and status symbols, which were circulated, accumulated, displayed and sacrificed in growing quantities. It is also argued that 'installation art' became increasingly important, particularly in linking key places to particular groups and their ancestors. Some long-term symbolic 'themes' are also identified. One may have referred to concerns about the definition of social identities and relations, while another may have referred to concerns over the demarcation, control and sharing of the landscape and its economic resources.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to begin to offer a synthesis of Neolithic material culture in Apulia, using the approach of visual culture studies. My research is based upon the analysis of a wide range of visually expressive artefacts ('portable art') and archaeological features ('installation art'). Analytical themes include the materials used, the production and appearance of the remains and their functions, but also their life histories, the values ascribed to them, and their impact on the viewer (Figures 1-2) (e.g. Skeates 1995a; 1995b). The contextual approach of archaeology underpins this work. Through it, interpretations are placed within the context of the long-term transformation of visual material. My interpretations are also informed by the approach of visual culture studies, with its emphasis on the social dynamics of visual communication (e.g. Mirzoeff 1999; Skeates 2001). 'Visual culture' is an area closely related to the study of 'art', which can be broadly defined as 'those made objects that are intended to be visually expressive and stimulating'. But the term 'visual culture', which has recently gained widespread interdisciplinary acceptance, usefully complements and broadens this definition, by highlighting the embeddedness of art in dynamic human processes. This is, in a sense, not a new approach for archaeologists, for it is clear that visual culture studies share much in common with contemporary 'contextual' and 'interpretative' archaeological approaches to the symbolic and structural meanings of material culture.

Visual culture in Neolithic South East Italy

I shall try to illustrate the relevance of this approach to prehistoric archaeology by examining developments in visual culture across successive phases of the Neolithic in South East Italy (c.f. Skeates 2000; 2002; Tinè & Simone 1984; Whitehouse 1992).

Community art: the first farmers

I shall begin with the Earlier Neolithic period, dated to between around 6150 and 5700 Cal. BC. This was a period of significant cultural transformation, which saw the appearance of a new package of resources, socio-economic practices and knowledge

relating to early farming. This spread across the southern Adriatic Sea, to North Apulia probably via agricultural 'colonists', and to Central and South Apulia via contacts with, and between, indigenous groups of hunter-gatherers. The whole process involved the intensification and maintenance of social relations between and within human groups. It was within this socio-economic process that the production and consumption of larger quantities, and new forms, of visual material may have played an active role, particularly in re-defining social relations previously established during the Final Upper Palaeolithic.

Body art, represented by traditional pendants and pigments, as well as by new bracelets and *pintaderas*, increased in quantity. Through this, the significance of the human body was enhanced as a medium for visual communication and social display was enhanced.

Portable art continued to be decorated with incised and painted motifs. This included a new range of food-related visual material, typified by highly decorated pottery vessels. These may have visually highlighted new social practices and values by which food was stored, prepared and shared. More generally, their locally produced impressed and painted styles are characterised by gradual regional innovation within the constraints of a widely shared southern Adriatic Impressed Ware tradition. This may have helped their makers and users express a degree of social differentiation, whilst maintaining social connections to distant relatives, places and ideas.

Installation art also became more overt, and took on new forms, at both open and cave sites. The laborious and repeated construction of circular enclosure ditches (and presumably banks), together with the ritual deposition of food, artefacts and human remains, sometimes in large quantities, represents a much greater physical intervention in, and symbolic demarcation of, the human landscape (than that of the Final Upper Palaeolithic). More specifically, ditches and their visual remains may have played an active part in the construction of social relations within and between new agricultural communities, helping to define and protect their social identities and economic resources, with particular reference to elders and ancestors.

Animate art: later Neolithic elaboration

The next period is the Later Neolithic, dated to between around 5700 and 4000 BC. This period saw the continued intensification of social relations amongst members of dispersed agricultural communities, characterised by increasing intensities of ritual activities and the development of slightly wider and more intensive exchange networks. Such relations were probably based, above all, on a recognition of the benefits of mutual dependency and social cohesion, rooted in ties of kinship. However, some clearer signs of social differentiation and competition also appear, both between communities (especially in North Apulia), and within them, particularly according to age and gender. In this context, greater social demands appear to have been placed upon the production and consumption of visual material, at both open and cave sites, where Neolithic visual material was elaborated further.

Among portable art-works, decorated fineware became highly prized. It was skilfully crafted by local potters, who exchanged stylistic information more intensively, at the same time as innovating more freely, to produce colourful, distinctive, beautiful and valuable artefacts that embedded social display and exchange in their practical functions.

Installation art was also transformed. Enclosure ditches were multiplied at major settlement sites, and ceremonial performances enacted within them and at sacred cave sites involved the structured ritual deposition of more overtly symbolic visual material. This included some distinctive pottery vessels, female figurines and cave paintings, which incorporated a powerful visual symbolism of figurative and abstract motifs. Generally, such practices may have been embedded in strategies of social control, intended to reinforce the cohesion and distinctive identity of local agricultural communities, at the same time as highlighting the power of elders and ancestors within them. But locally specific meanings may also have been expressed. In the painted caves of Grotta di Porto Badisco, for example, situated in South Apulia, the recurrent figurative representation of the hunting of game animals might have related to tensions within indigenous groups with a Palaeolithic ancestry surrounding their full transition to an agricultural way of life.

Status art: early Copper Age innovation and competition

The Final Neolithic or Early Copper Age follows, dated to between around 4000 and 2900 BC. This period is marked by a widespread cultural re-orientation, characterised by the abandonment of some coastal lowland settlements and a dispersal of settlement inland, the broadening of subsistence strategies, the development of social competition and even warfare between groups, the strengthening of long-distance communication and exchange networks, particularly between Apulia and the south Tyrrhenian region, and the adoption of new production techniques and of a new set of ritual practices and symbols. The degree of innovation exhibited by the visual material of this period is particularly striking, as seen in new types of ornaments, figurines, weapons, pottery decoration and mortuary structure. However, underlying evidence of cultural continuity suggests that, rather than reflecting widespread population change, these novel features appeared within a continued long-term process of local socio-economic transformation. Integral to this was the production and consumption of new forms of visual material, which contributed in particular to the re-definition and differentiation of social status by increasingly competitive members of social groups.

Portable art-works are characterised by a slightly greater variety and quantity of valuable goods, including polished fineware vessels, ornaments and weapons. These generally conformed to widespread inter-regional styles and were often finely made, sometimes of exotic raw materials. They may therefore have been used not only as practical goods, but also circulated as valuable commodities and tokens of social alliance, in long distance networks of ceremonial gift-exchange. This system probably also stimulated local production. Local potters, for example, may have been actively encouraged to develop their traditional skills and products, even to the extent of rejecting traditional techniques and forms (such as painted geometric motifs), by adopting and reproducing influential, exotic, ideas and values relating to the production of new aesthetically and socially valuable art-forms (such as slipped and polished fineware).

These valuables are often found as grave goods, carefully placed in association with selected human bodies, where they appear to have contributed to the symbolic definition of the status of the deceased, including their gender roles. Such mortuary deposits, which became the focus of installation art at this time, were often protected by more durable structures, including stone cists and rock-cut tombs. These were often

located at ancestral sites, including on top of abandoned ditched enclosures and within sacred caves, but a few were also established in newly settled interior parts of the landscape. Throughout the region, their construction may have helped kin-groups to stake claims to territories, both ancestral and new.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to emphasise the embeddedness of visual material in the cultural process, and to examine the regionally specific transformations in its form and significance through the Neolithic in Apulia. From this long-term perspective it is clear that portable art was increasingly valued as ritual paraphernalia, gifts and status symbols, which were circulated, accumulated, displayed and sacrificed in growing quantities. It is also evident that installation art, including natural caves and artificial monuments, became increasingly important, particularly in linking key places to particular groups and their ancestors. Some long-term 'themes' (as opposed to specific meanings, which may always have been ambiguous or open to re-interpretation) also emerge in the relation to the symbolic dimensions of this visual material. One major theme, constantly expressed in different art-forms, referred to concerns about the definition of social identities and relations, including relations of kinship, gender, age and power between members of different social groups. Related to this was another key symbolic theme which referred to concerns over the demarcation, control and sharing of the landscape and its economic resources, particularly food, by dispersed groups who were mutually dependent but increasingly competitive. It was tensions over fundamental, quotidian, socio-economic issues such as these that lay at the heart of the long-term transformation of visual culture in prehistoric south-east Italy.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Professor John Bintliff of Leiden University for his helpful comments on the version of this paper that was presented at the conference.

References

Bradford, J., Ancient Landscapes: Studies in Field Archaeology, London.

Cassano, S.M., Santa Tecchia, in Coppa Nevigata e il suo Territorio: Testimonianze Archeologiche dal VII al II Millennio a.C., Roma, 86-88.

Mirzoeff, N. 1999, An Introduction to Visual Culture, London.

Skeates, R. 1995a, Animate Objects: a Biography of Prehistoric 'Axe-Amulets' in the Central Mediterranean Region, Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society 61, 279-301.

Skeates, R. 1995b, Ritual, Context, and Gender in Neolithic South-Eastern Italy, Journal of European Archaeology 2.2, 199-214.

Skeates, R. 2000, The Social Dynamics of Enclosure in the Neolithic of the Tavoliere, South-East Italy, Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology 13.2, 155-88.

Skeates, R. 2001, Archaeologies of Art: Contributions to World Art Studies, in Raising the Eyebrow: John Onians and World Art Studies − an Album Amicorum in his Honour, Oxford, 289-300.

Skeates, R. 2002, Visual Culture in Prehistoric South-East Italy, Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society 68, 165-83.

Tinè, S. and Simone, L. 1984, Il Neolitico, in La Daunia Antic: dalla Preistoria all'Altomedioevo, Milano, 75-100.
Whitehouse, R.D. 1992, Underground Religion: Cult and Culture in Prehistoric Italy, London.

Captions for illustrations

Figure 1. ‘Portable art’: Neolithic painted pottery from Santa Tecchia (after Cassano 1987: Tav. VIII).

Figure 2. ‘Installation art’: the Neolithic multiple ditched enclosure site of Masseria Fongo, photographed from the air (after Bradford 1957: Plate 28).